

I'd Love You To Want Me

The first time the professor called Mrs. Khanh by the wrong name was at a wedding banquet, the kind of crowded affair they attended often, usually out of obligation. As the bride and groom approached their table, Mrs. Khanh noticed the professor reading his palms, where he'd jotted down his toast and the names of the newlyweds, whom they had never met. Leaning close to be heard over the chatter of four hundred guests and the din of the band, she found her husband redolent of well-worn paperbacks and threadbare carpet. It was a comforting mustiness, one that she associated with secondhand bookstores.

"Don't worry," she said. "You've done this a thousand times."

"Have I?" The professor rubbed his hands on his pants. "I can't seem to recall." His fair skin was thin as paper and

lined with blue veins. From the precise part of his silver hair to the gleam on his brown oxfords, he appeared to be the same man who'd taught so many students he could no longer count them. During the two minutes the newlyweds visited their table, he didn't miss a beat, calling the couple by their correct names and bestowing the good wishes expected of him as the eldest among the ten guests. But while the groom tugged at the collar of his Nehru jacket and the bride plucked at the skirt of her empire-waist gown, Mrs. Khanh could think only of the night of the diagnosis, when the professor had frightened her by weeping for the first time in their four decades together. Only after the young couple left could she relax, sighing as deeply as she could in the strict confines of her velvet *ao dai*.

"The girl's mother tells me they're honeymooning for the first week in Paris." She spooned a lobster claw onto the professor's plate. "The second week they'll be on the French Riviera."

"Is that so?" Cracked lobster in tamarind sauce was Professor Khanh's favorite, but tonight he stared with doubt at the claw pointing toward him. "What did the French call Vung Tau?"

"Cap Saint Jacques."

"We had a very good time there. Didn't we?"

"That's when you finally started talking to me."

"Who wouldn't be shy around you," the professor murmured. Forty years ago, when she was nineteen and he was thirty-three, they had honeymooned at a beachside hotel on

the cape. It was on their balcony, under a full, bright moon, listening to the French singing and shouting on their side of the beach, that the professor had suddenly started talking. "Imagine!" he said, voice filled with wonder as he began speaking about how the volume of the Pacific equaled the moon's. When he was finished, he went on to talk about the strange fish of deep sea canyons and then the inexplicability of rogue waves. If after a while she lost track of what he said, it hardly mattered, for by then the sound of his voice had seduced her, as reassuring in its measured tones as the first time she'd heard it, eavesdropping from her family's kitchen as he explained to her father his dissertation on the Kuroshio current's thermodynamics.

Now the professor's memories were gradually stealing away from him, and along with them the long sentences he once favored. When the band swung into "I'd Love You to Want Me," he loosened the fat Windsor knot of his tie and said, "Remember this song?"

"What about it?"

"We listened to it all the time. Before the children were born."

The song hadn't been released yet during her first pregnancy, but Mrs. Khanh said, "That's right."

"Let's dance." The professor leaned closer, draping one arm over the back of her chair. A fingerprint smudged one lens of his glasses. "You always insisted we dance when you heard this song, Yen."

"Oh?" Mrs. Khanh took a slow sip from her glass of water, hiding her surprise at being called by someone else's name. "When did we ever dance?"

The professor didn't answer, for the swelling chorus of the song had brought him to his feet. As he stepped toward the parquet dance floor, Mrs. Khanh seized the tail of his gray pinstripe jacket. "Stop it!" she said, pulling hard. "Sit down!"

Giving her a wounded look, the professor obeyed. Mrs. Khanh was aware of the other guests at their table staring at them. She held herself very still, unable to account for any woman named Yen. Perhaps Yen was an old acquaintance whom the professor never saw fit to mention, or the maternal grandmother whom Mrs. Khanh had never met and whose name she couldn't now recall, or a grade school teacher with whom he'd once been infatuated. Mrs. Khanh had begun preparing for many things, but she wasn't prepared for unknown people emerging from the professor's mind.

"The song's almost over," the professor said.

"We'll dance when we get home. I promise."

Despite his condition, or perhaps because of it, the professor insisted on driving them back. Mrs. Khanh was tense as she watched him handling the car, but he drove in his usual slow and cautious manner. He was quiet until he took a left at Golden West instead of a right, his wrong turn taking them by the community college from where he'd retired last spring. After coming to America, he'd been unable to find work in oceanography, and had settled for teaching Vietnamese. For

the last twenty years, he'd lectured under fluorescent lighting to bored students. When Mrs. Khanh wondered if one of those students might be Yen, she felt a jab of pain that she mistook at first for heartburn. Only upon second thought did she recognize it as jealousy.

The professor suddenly braked to a stop. Mrs. Khanh braced herself with one hand against the dashboard and waited to be called by that name again, but the professor made no mention of Yen. He swung the car into a U-turn instead, and as they headed toward home, he asked in a tone of great reproach, "Why didn't you tell me we were going in the wrong direction?" Watching all the traffic lights on the street ahead of them turn green as if on cue, Mrs. Khanh realized that his was a question for which she had no good answer.

The next morning, Mrs. Khanh was standing at the stove preparing brunch for their eldest son's visit when the professor came into the kitchen, freshly bathed and shaved. He took a seat at the kitchen counter, unfolded the newspaper, and began reading to her from the headlines. Only after he'd finished did she begin telling him about last night's events. He'd asked her to inform him of those moments when he no longer acted like himself, and she had gotten as far as his lunge for the dance floor when the sag of his shoulders stopped her.

"It's all right," she said, alarmed. "It's not your fault."

"But can you see me on the dance floor at my age?" The professor rolled up the newspaper and rapped it against the counter for emphasis. "And in my condition?"

Taking out a small blue notebook from his shirt pocket, the professor retreated to the patio, where he was writing down his errors when Vinh arrived. Fresh from his graveyard shift at the county hospital, their son wore a nurse's green scrubs, which, shapeless as they were, did little to hide his physique. If only he visited his parents as much as he did the gym, Mrs. Khanh thought. The edge of her hand could have fitted into the deep cleft of her son's chest, and her thighs weren't quite as thick as his biceps. Under one arm, he was carrying a bulky package wrapped in brown paper, which he propped against the trellis behind his father.

The professor slipped the notebook into his pocket and pointed his pen at the package. "What's the surprise?" he asked. While Mrs. Khanh brought out the eggs Benedict, Vinh stripped off the wrapping to reveal a painting in a heavy gilded frame evocative of nineteenth-century Europe. "It cost me a hundred dollars on Dong Khoi," he said. He had gone to Saigon on vacation last month. "The galleries there can knock off anything, but it was easier to frame it here."

The professor leaned forward to squint at the painting. "There was a time when that street was called Tu Do," he remarked wistfully. "And before that, Rue Catinat."

"I hoped you'd remember," Vinh said, sitting down next to his mother at the patio table. Mrs. Khanh could tell that the subject of the painting was a woman, but one whose left eye

was green and whose right eye was red, which was nowhere near as odd as the way the artist had flattened her arms and torso, leaving her to look less like a real person and more like a child's paper doll, cut out and pasted to a three-dimensional chair. "There's a new study that shows how Picasso's paintings can stimulate people like Ba."

"Is that so?" The professor wiped his glasses with his napkin. Behind him was the scene to which Mrs. Khanh was now accustomed, an entrance ramp rising over their backyard and merging onto the freeway that Vinh would take home to Los Angeles, an hour north of their Westminster neighborhood. Her boys used to pass their afternoons spotting the makes and models of the passing cars, as if they were ornithologists distinguishing between juncos and sparrows. But that was a very long time ago, she thought, and Vinh was now a messenger dispatched by the rest of their six children.

"We think you should retire from the library, Ma," he said, knife and fork in hand. "We can send home enough money every month to cover all the bills. You can have a housekeeper to help you out. And a gardener, too."

Mrs. Khanh had never needed help with the garden, which was entirely of her own design. A horseshoe of green lawn divided a perimeter of persimmon trees from the center of the garden, where pale green cilantro, arrow-leaved basil, and Thai chilies grew abundantly in the beds she'd made for them. She seasoned her eggs Benedict with three dashes of pepper, and when she was certain that she could speak without betraying her irritation, she said, "I like to garden."

"Mexican gardeners come cheap, Ma. Besides, you'll want all the help you can get. You've got to be ready for the worst."

"We've seen much worse than you," the professor snapped. "We're ready for anything."

"And I'm not old enough for retirement," Mrs. Khanh added.

"Be reasonable." Vinh sounded nothing like the boy who, upon reaching his teenage years, had turned into someone his parents no longer knew, sneaking out of the house at night to be with his girlfriend, an American who painted her nails black and dyed her hair purple. The professor remedied the situation by nailing the windows shut, a problem Vinh solved by eloping soon after his graduation from Bolsa Grande High. "I'm in love," Vinh had screamed to his mother over the phone from Las Vegas. "But you wouldn't know anything about that, would you?" Sometimes Mrs. Khanh regretted ever telling him that her father had arranged her marriage.

"You don't need the money from that job," Vinh said. "But Ba needs you at home."

Mrs. Khanh pushed away her plate, the eggs barely touched. She wouldn't take advice from someone whose marriage hadn't lasted more than three years. "It's not about the money, Kevin."

Vinh sighed, for his mother used his American name only when she was upset with him. "Maybe you should help Ba," he said, pointing to the front of his father's polo shirt, marred by a splash of hollandaise sauce.

"Look at this," the professor said, brushing at the stain with his fingers. "It's only because you've upset me." Vinh sighed once more, but Mrs. Khanh refused to look at him as she dabbed a napkin in her glass of water. She wondered if he remembered their escape from Vung Tau on a rickety fishing trawler, overloaded with his five siblings and sixty strangers, three years after the war's end. After the fourth day at sea, he and the rest of the children, bleached by the sun, were crying for water, even though there was none to offer but the sea's. Nevertheless, she had washed their faces and combed their hair every morning, using salt water and spit. She was teaching them that decorum mattered even now, and that their mother's fear wasn't so strong that it could prevent her from loving them.

"Don't worry," she said. "The stain will come out." As she leaned forward to scrub the professor's shirt, Mrs. Khanh had a clear view of the painting. She liked neither the painting nor its gilded frame. It was too ornate for her taste, and seemed too old-fashioned for the painting. The disjuncture between the frame and the painting only exaggerated the painting's most disturbing feature, the way the woman's eyes looked forth from one side of her face. The sight of those eyes made Mrs. Khanh so uneasy that later that day, after Vinh went home, she moved the painting to the professor's library, where she left it facing a wall.

It wasn't long after their son's visit that the professor stopped attending Sunday mass. Mrs. Khanh stayed home as well,

and gradually they began seeing less and less of their friends. The only times she left the house were to go shopping or to the Garden Grove library, where her fellow librarians knew nothing of the professor's illness. She enjoyed her part-time job, ordering and sorting the sizable collection of Vietnamese books and movies purchased for the residents of nearby Little Saigon, who, if they came to the library with a question, were directed to her perch behind the circulation desk. Answering those questions, Mrs. Khanh always felt the gratification that made her job worthwhile, the pleasure of being needed, if only for a brief amount of time.

When her shift ended at noon and she gathered her things to go home, she always did so with a sense of dread that shamed her. She made up for her shame by bidding goodbye to the other librarians with extra cheer, and by preparing the house for emergencies with great energy, as if she could forestall the inevitable through hard work. She marked a path from bed to bathroom with fluorescent yellow tape, so the professor wouldn't get lost at night, and on the wall across from the toilet, she taped a sign at eye level that said *FLUSH*. She composed a series of lists which, posted strategically around the house, reminded the professor in what order to put his clothes on, what to put in his pockets before he left home, and what times of the day he should eat. But it was the professor who hired a handyman to install iron bars on the windows. "You wouldn't want me sneaking out at night," the professor said with resignation, leaning his forehead against the bars. "And neither would I."

For Mrs. Khanh, the more urgent problem was the professor coming home as a stranger. Whereas her husband was never one to be romantic, this stranger returned from one of the afternoon walks he insisted on taking by himself with a red rose in a plastic tube. He'd never before bought flowers of any sort, preferring to surprise her with more enduring presents, like the books he gave her every now and again, on topics like how to make friends and influence people, or income tax preparation. Once he had surprised her by giving her fiction, a collection of short stories by an author she had never heard of before. Even this effort was slightly off the mark, for she preferred novels. She never read past the title pages of his gifts, satisfied at seeing her name penned in his elegant hand beneath those of the authors. But if the professor had spent his life practicing calligraphy, he'd never given a thought to presenting roses, and when he bowed while offering her the flower, he appeared to be suffering from a stomach cramp.

"Who's this for?" she asked.

"Is there anyone else here?" The professor shook the rose for emphasis, and one of its petals, browning at the edges, fell off. "It's for you."

"It's very pretty." She took the rose reluctantly. "Where did you get it?"

"Mr. Esteban. He tried selling me oranges also, but I said we had our own."

"And who am I?" she demanded. "What's my name?" He squinted at her. "Yen, of course."

"Of course." Biting her lip, she fought the urge to snap the head off the rose. She displayed the flower in a vase on the dining table for the professor's sake, but by the time she brought out dinner an hour later, he had forgotten he bought it. As he nibbled on blackened tiger shrimp, grilled on skewers, and tofu shimmering in black bean sauce, he talked animatedly instead about the postcard they'd received that afternoon from their eldest daughter, working for American Express in Munich. Mrs. Khanh examined the picture of the Marienplatz before turning over the postcard to read aloud the note, which remarked on the curious absence of pigeons.

"Little things stay with you when you travel," observed the professor, sniffing at the third course, a soup of bitter melon. Their children had never acquired the taste for it, but it reminded the professor and Mrs. Khanh of their own childhood.

"Such as?"

"The price of cigarettes," the professor said. "When I returned to Saigon after finishing my studies, I couldn't buy my daily Gauloises any longer. The imported price was too much."

She leaned the postcard against the vase, where it would serve as a memento of the plans they'd once made for traveling to all of the world's great cities after their retirement. The only form of transport Mrs. Khanh had ruled out was the ocean cruise. Open expanses of water prompted fears of drowning, a phobia so strong that she no longer took baths, and even when showering kept her back to the spray.

"Now why did you buy that?" the professor asked.

"The postcard?"

"No, the rose."

"I didn't buy it." Mrs. Khanh chose her words carefully, not wanting to disturb the professor too much, and yet wanting him to know what he had done. "You did."

"Me?" The professor was astonished. "Are you certain?"

"I am absolutely certain," she said, surprised to hear the gratification in her voice.

The professor didn't notice. He only sighed and took out the blue notebook from the pocket of his shirt. "Let's hope that won't happen again," he muttered.

"I don't suppose it will." Mrs. Khanh stood to gather the dishes. She hoped her face didn't show her anger, convinced as she was that the professor had intended the rose for this other woman. She was carrying four plates, the tureen, and both their glasses when, at the kitchen's threshold, the wobbling weight of her load became too much. The sound of silverware clattering on the tiled floor and the smash of porcelain breaking made the professor cry out from the dining room. "What's that?" he shouted.

Mrs. Khanh stared at the remains of the tureen at her feet. Three uneaten green coins of bitter melon, stuffed with pork, lay sodden on the floor among the shards. "It's nothing," she said. "I'll take care of it."

After he'd fallen asleep later that evening, she went to his library, where the painting she had propped by his desk was now turned face forward. She sighed. If he kept turning

the painting this way, she would at least have to reframe it in something more modern and suitable. She sat down at his desk, flanked on either side by bookshelves that held several hundred volumes in Vietnamese, French, and English. His ambition was to own more books than he could ever possibly read, a desire fueled by having left behind all his books when they had fled Vietnam. Dozens of paperbacks cluttered his desk, and she had to shove them aside to find the notebooks where he'd been tracking his mistakes over the past months. He had poured salt into his coffee and sprinkled sugar into his soup; when a telemarketer had called, he'd agreed to five-year subscriptions to *Guns & Ammo* and *Cosmopolitan*; and one day he'd tucked his wallet in the freezer, giving new meaning to the phrase cold, hard cash, or so he'd joked with her when she discovered it. But there was no mention of Yen, and after a moment's hesitation, underneath his most recent entry, Mrs. Khanh composed the following: "Today I called my wife by the name of Yen," she wrote. She imitated the flourishes of the professor's penmanship with great care, pretending that what she was doing was for the professor's own good. "This mistake must not be repeated."

The following morning, the professor held forth his coffee cup and said, "Please pass me the sugar, Yen." The next day, as she trimmed his hair in the bathroom, he asked, "What's on television tonight, Yen?" As he called her by the other woman's name again and again over the following weeks, the question

of who this woman was consumed her days. Perhaps Yen was a childhood crush, or a fellow student of his graduate school years in Marseille, or even a second wife in Saigon, someone he'd visited on the way home from the university, during those long early evening hours when he told her he was sitting in his office on campus, correcting student exams. She recorded every incident of mistaken identity in his notebooks, but the next morning he would read her forgeries without reaction, and not long afterward would call her Yen once more, until she thought she might burst into tears if she heard that name again.

The woman was most likely a fantasy found by the professor's wandering mind, or so she told herself after catching him naked from the waist down, kneeling over the bathtub and scrubbing furiously at his pants and underwear under a jet of hot water. Glaring over his shoulder, the professor had screamed, "Get out!" She jumped back, slamming the bathroom door in her haste. Never before had the professor lost such control of himself, or yelled at her, not even in those first days after coming to southern California, when they'd eaten from food stamps, gotten housing assistance, and worn secondhand clothes donated by the parishioners of St. Albans. That was true love, she thought, not giving roses but going to work every day and never once complaining about teaching Vietnamese to so-called heritage learners, immigrant and refugee students who already knew the language but merely wanted an easy grade.

Not even during the most frightening time of her life, when they were lost on the great azure plain of the sea, rolling

unbroken to the horizon, did the professor raise his voice. By the fifth evening, the only sounds besides the waves slapping at the hull were children whimpering and adults praying to God, Buddha, and their ancestors. The professor hadn't prayed. Instead, he had stood at the ship's bow as if he were at his lectern, the children huddled together at his knees for protection against the evening wind, and told them lies. "You can't see it even in daylight," he'd said, "but the current we're traveling on is going straight to the Philippines, the way it's done since the dawn of time." He repeated his story so often even she allowed herself to believe it, until the afternoon of the seventh day, when they saw, in the distance, the rocky landing strip of a foreign coast. Nesting upon it were the huts of a fishing village, seemingly composed of twigs and grass, brooded over by a fringe of mangroves. At the sight of land, she had thrown herself into the professor's arms, knocking his glasses askew, and sobbed openly for the first time in front of her startled children. She was so seized by the ecstasy of knowing that they would all live that she had blurted out "I love you." It was something she had never said in public and hardly ever in private, and the professor, embarrassed by their children's giggles, had only smiled and adjusted his glasses. His embarrassment only deepened once they reached land, which the locals informed them was the north shore of eastern Malaysia.

For some reason, the professor never spoke of this time at sea, although he referred to so many other things they had done in the past together, including events of which she had

no recollection. The more she listened to him, the more she feared her own memory was faltering. Perhaps they really had eaten ice cream flavored with durian on the veranda of a tea plantation in the central highlands, reclining on rattan chairs. And was it possible they'd fed bamboo shoots to the tame deer in the Saigon zoo? Or together had beaten off a pickpocket, a scabby refugee from the bombed-out countryside who'd sneaked up on them in the Ben Thanh market?

As the days of spring lengthened into summer, she answered the phone less and less, eventually turning off the ringer so the professor wouldn't answer calls either. She was afraid that if someone asked for her, he would say, "Who?" Even more worrying was the prospect of him speaking to their friends or children of Yen. When her daughter phoned from Munich, she said, "Your father's not doing so well," but left the details vague. She was more forthcoming with Vinh, knowing that whatever she told him he would e-mail to the other children. Whenever he left a message, she could hear the hiss of grease in a pan, or the chatter of a news channel, or the beeping of horns. He called her on his cell phone only as he did something else. She admitted that as much as she loved her son, she liked him very little, a confession that made her unhappy with herself until the day she called him back and he asked, "Have you decided? Are you going to quit?"

"Don't make me tell you one more time." She wrapped the telephone cord tightly around her index finger. "I'm never going to quit."

After she hung up the phone, she returned to the task of changing the sheets the professor had bed-wet the previous evening. Her head was aching from lack of sleep, her back was sore from the chores, and her neck was tight with worry. When bedtime came, she was unable to sleep, listening to the professor talk about how gusts of the mistral blew him from one side to the other of the winding narrow streets of Le Panier, where he'd lived in a basement apartment during his Marseille years, or about the hypnotic sound made by the scratch of a hundred pens on paper as students took their exams. As he talked, she studied the dim light in their bedroom, cast off from the streetlamps outside, and remembered how the moon over the South China Sea was so bright that even at midnight she could see the fearful expressions on her children's faces. She was counting the cars passing by outside, listening for the sounds of their engines and hoping for sleep, when the professor touched her hand in the dark. "If you close your eyes," he said gently, "you might hear the ocean."

Mrs. Khanh closed her eyes.

September came and went. October passed and the Santa Ana winds came, rushing from the mountains to the east with the force of freeway traffic, breaking the stalks of the Egyptian papyrus she'd planted in ceramic pots next to the trellis. She no longer allowed the professor to walk by himself in the afternoons, but instead followed him discreetly at a distance of ten or twenty feet, clutching her hat against the winds. If the

Santa Ana had subsided, they read together on the patio. Over the past few months, the professor had taken to reading out loud, and slowly. Each day he seemed to read even more loudly, and more slowly, until the afternoon in November when he stopped in mid-sentence for so long that the silence shook Mrs. Khanh from the grip of Quynh Dao's latest romance.

"What's the matter?" she asked, closing her book.

"I've been trying to read this sentence for five minutes," the professor said, staring at the page. When he looked up, she saw tears in his eyes. "I'm losing my mind, aren't I?"

From then on, she read to him whenever she was free, from books on academic topics she had no interest in whatsoever. She stopped whenever he began reciting a memory—the anxiety he felt on meeting her father for the first time, while she waited in the kitchen to be introduced; the day of their wedding, when he nearly fainted from the heat and the tightness of his cravat; or the day they returned to Saigon three years ago and visited their old house on Phan Than Gian, which they could not find at first because the street had been renamed Dien Bien Phu. Saigon had also changed names after it changed hands, but they couldn't bring themselves to call it Ho Chi Minh City. Neither could the taxi driver who ferried them from their hotel to the house, even though he was too young to remember a time when the city was officially Saigon.

They parked two houses down from their old house, and stayed in the taxi to avoid the revolutionary cadres from the north who had moved in after the Communist takeover. She and the professor were nearly overwhelmed by sadness and

rage, fuming as they wondered who these strangers were who had taken such poor care of their house. The solitary alley lamp illuminated tears of rust streaking the walls, washed down from the iron grill of the terrace by the monsoon rain. As the taxi's wipers squeaked against the windshield, a late-night masseur biked past, announcing his calling with the shake of a glass bottle filled with pebbles.

"You told me it was the loneliest sound in the world," said the professor.

Before he started talking, she'd been reading to him from a biography of de Gaulle, and her finger was still on the last word she'd read. She didn't like to think about their lost home, and she didn't remember having said any such thing. "The wipers or the glass bottle?" she asked.

"The bottle."

"It seemed so at the time," she lied. "I hadn't heard that sound in years."

"We heard it often. In Dalat." The professor took off his glasses and wiped them with his handkerchief. He had gone once to a resort in the mountains of Dalat for a conference while she stayed in Saigon, pregnant. "You always wanted to eat your ice cream outside in the evenings," the professor continued. "But it's hard to eat ice cream in the tropics, Yen. One has no time to savor it. Unless one is indoors, with air conditioning."

"Dairy products give you indigestion."

"If one eats ice cream in a bowl, it rapidly becomes soup. If one eats it in a cone, it melts all over one's hand." When he

turned to her and smiled, she saw gumdrops of mucus in the corners of his eyes. "You loved those brown sugar cones, Yen. You insisted that I hold yours for you so your hand wouldn't get sticky."

A breeze rattled the bougainvillea, the first hint, perhaps, of the Santa Ana returning. The sound of her own voice shocked her as well as the professor, who stared at her with his mouth agape when she said, "That's not my name. I am not that woman, whoever she is, if she even exists."

"Oh?" The professor slowly closed his mouth and put his glasses back on. "Your name isn't Yen?"

"No," she said.

"Then what is it?"

She wasn't prepared for the question, having been worried only about her husband calling her by the wrong name. They rarely used each other's proper names, preferring endearments like *Anh*, for him, or *Em*, for her, and when they spoke to each other in front of the children, they called themselves Ba and Ma. Usually she heard her first name spoken only by friends, relatives, or bureaucrats, or when she introduced herself to someone new, as she was, in a sense, doing now.

"My name is Sa," she said. "I am your wife."

"Right." The professor licked his lips and took out his notebook.

That evening, after they had gone to bed and she heard him breathing evenly, she switched on her lamp and reached across his body for the notebook, propped on the alarm clock.

His writing had faded into such a scribble that she was forced to read what he wrote twice, following the jags and peaks of his letters down a dog-eared page until she reached the bottom, where she deciphered the following: *Matters worsening. Today she insisted I call her by another name. Must keep closer eye on her*—here she licked her finger and used it to turn the page—*for she may not know who she is anymore*. She closed the book abruptly, with a slap of the pages, but the professor, curled up on his side, remained still. A scent of sweat and sulfur emanated from underneath the sheets. If it wasn't for his quiet breathing and the heat of his body, he might have been dead, and for a moment as fleeting as *déjà vu*, she wished he really were.

In the end there was no choice. On her last day at work, her fellow librarians threw her a surprise farewell party, complete with cake and a wrapped gift box that held a set of travel guides for the vacations they knew she'd always wanted to take. She fondled the guides for a while, riffling through their pages, and when she almost wept, her fellow librarians thought she was being sentimental. Driving home with the box of guides in the backseat, next to a package of adult diapers she'd picked up from Sav-On's that morning, she fought to control the sense that ever so slowly the book of her life was being closed.

When she opened the door to their house and called out his name, she heard only bubbling from the fish tank. After not finding him in any of the bedrooms or bathrooms, she

left the diapers and box of books in his library. An open copy of *Sports Illustrated* was on his recliner in the living room, a half-eaten jar of applesauce sat on the kitchen counter, and in the backyard, the chenille throw he wore around his lap in cool weather lay on the ground. Floating in his teacup on the patio table was a curled petal from the bougainvillea, shuttling back and forth.

Panic almost made her call the police. But they wouldn't do anything so soon; they'd tell her to call back when he was missing for a day or two. As for Vinh, she ruled him out, not wanting to hear him say, "I told you so." Regret swept over her then, a wave of feeling born from her guilt over being so selfish. Her librarian's instinct for problem solving and orderly research kept her standing under the weight of that regret, and she returned to her car determined to find the professor. She drove around her block first before expanding in ever-widening circles, the windows rolled down on both sides. The neighborhood park, where she and the professor often strolled, was abandoned except for squirrels chasing each other through the branches of an oak tree. The sidewalks were empty of pedestrians or joggers, except for a withered man in a plaid shirt standing on a corner, selling roses from plastic buckets and oranges from crates, his eyes shaded by a grimy baseball cap. When she called him Mr. Esteban, his eyes widened; when she asked him if he'd seen the professor, he smiled apologetically and said, "No hablo inglés. Lo siento."

Doubling back on her tracks, she drove each street and lane and cul-de-sac a second time. Leaning out the window,

she called his name, first in a low voice, shy about making a scene, and then in a shout. "Anh Khanh!" she cried. "Anh Khanh!" A few window curtains twitched, and a couple of passing cars slowed down, their drivers glancing at her curiously. But he didn't spring forth from behind anyone's hedges, or emerge from a stranger's door.

Only after it was dark did she return. The moment she walked through the front door, she smelled the gas. A kettle was on the stove, but the burner hadn't been lit. Both her pace and her pulse quickened from a walk to a sprint. After shutting off the gas, she saw that the glass doors leading to the patio, which she'd closed before her departure, were slightly ajar. There was a heavy, long flashlight in one of the kitchen drawers, and the heft of the aluminum barrel in her hand was comforting as she slowly approached the glass doors. But when she shone the light over the patio and onto the garden, she saw only her persimmon trees and the red glint of the chilies.

She was in the hallway when she saw the light spilling out of the professor's library. When she peeked around the door frame, she saw the professor with his back to the door. At his feet was her box of books, and he stood facing the bookshelf that was reserved for her. Here, she kept her magazines and the books he'd given her over the years. The professor knelt, picked a book from the box, and stood up to shelve it. He repeated the same motion, one book at a time. *Hidden Tahiti and French Polynesia*. Frommer's *Hawaii*. *National Geographic Traveler: The Caribbean*. With each book, he mumbled

something she couldn't hear, as if he might be trying to read the titles on the spines. *Essential Greek Islands*. *Jerusalem and the Holy Land*. *World Cultures: Japan*. *A Romantic's Guide to Italy*. He touched the cover of each book with great care, tenderly, and she knew, not for the first time, that it wasn't she who was the love of his life.

The professor shelved the last book and turned around. The expression on his face when he saw her was the one he'd worn forty years ago at their first meeting, when she'd entered the living room of her father's house and seen him pale with anxiety, eyes blinking in anticipation. "Who are you?" he cried, raising his hand as if to ward off a blow. Her heart was beating fast and her breathing was heavy. When she swallowed, her mouth was dry, but she could feel a sheen of dampness on her palms. It struck her then that these were the same sensations she'd felt that first time, seeing him in a white linen suit wrinkled by high humidity, straw fedora pinned between hand and thigh.

"It's just me," she said. "It's Yen."

"Oh," the professor said, lowering his hand. He sat down heavily in his armchair, and she saw that his oxfords were encrusted in mud. As she crossed the carpet to the bookshelf, he followed her with a hooded gaze, his look one of exhaustion. She was about to take *Les Petites Rues de Paris* from the bookshelf for the evening's reading, but when she saw him close his eyes and lean back in his armchair, it was clear that he wouldn't be traveling anywhere. Neither would she. Having ruled out the travel guides, she decided against the self-help

books and the how-to manuals as well. Then she saw the thin and uncracked spine of the book of short stories.

A short story, she thought, would be just long enough.

Sitting beside him on the carpet, she found herself next to the painting. She turned her back to the woman with the two eyes on one side of her face, and she promised herself that tomorrow she would have the painting reframed. When she opened the book, she could feel the woman looking over her shoulder at her name, written in his precise hand under that of the author. She wondered what, if anything, she knew about love. Not much, perhaps, but enough to know that what she would do for him now she would do again tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that. She would read out loud, from the beginning. She would read with measured breath, to the very end. She would read as if every letter counted, page by page and word by word.